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Whatever Happened to German America?

By ERIK KIRSCHBAUM SEPT. 23, 2015

Berlin — WHAT is America's largest national ethnic group? If you said English, Italian or Mexican, you're wrong. Today some 46 million Americans can claim German ancestry. The difference is, very few of them do.

Indeed, aside from Oktoberfest, German culture has largely disappeared from the American landscape. What happened?

At the turn of the last century, Germans were the predominant ethnic group in the United States — some eight million people, out of a population of 76 million. New York City had one of the world's largest German-speaking populations, trailing only Berlin and Vienna, with about a quarter of its 3.4 million people conversing *auf Deutsch*. Entire communities, spreading from northern Wisconsin to rural Texas, consisted almost exclusively of German immigrants and their children.

As they spread through the country, they founded church denominations, singing societies, even whole industries — pre-Prohibition brewing was dominated by Germans, whose names live on in brands like Pabst, Busch and Miller. Their numbers shaped the media — there were 488 German-language daily and weekly newspapers around 1900 keeping the language and culture alive — and politics: Midwestern German-Americans were a backbone of the early Republican Party.

The enormous number of German-Americans was also a factor in keeping the United States out of World War I for so long — activists lobbied against intervening on the Allies' side, while politicians worried about losing a sizable voting bloc.

Partly for that reason, when the United States did enter the war, German-Americans came under intense, and often violent, scrutiny, especially after the revelation of an ill-conceived German plan for Mexico to invade the United States.

There had long been doubts about the loyalty of German-Americans, especially in the myriad pockets of the Midwest where they were particularly dominant. Many had hoped to stave off assimilation by clinging to their language and dual loyalties — but that commitment to their culture suddenly became a vulnerability.

In what is a largely forgotten chapter of American history, during the roughly 18 months of American involvement in the war, people with German roots were falsely accused of being spies or saboteurs; hundreds were interned or convicted of sedition on trumped-up charges, or for offenses as trivial as making critical comments about the war. More than 30 were killed by vigilantes and anti-German mobs; hundreds of others were beaten or tarred and feathered.

Even the German music of Beethoven and Brahms, which had been assumed to be immune to the hysteria, came under attack. “It is the music of conquest, the music of the storm, of disorder and devastation,” wrote *The Los Angeles Times* in June 1918. “It is a combination of the howl of the cave man and the roaring of the north winds.” Sheet music, along with books by German authors, was burned in public spectacles.

Not surprisingly, those who could hid their Germanic roots; some switched their names; many others canceled their subscriptions to German newspapers, which virtually disappeared. Whatever vestige of German America remained after the 1910s was wiped out by similar pressures during World War II, not to mention the shame that came with German identity after it.

My grandfather Joseph Kirschbaum lived through this disruption. Born in New York to German immigrant parents in 1891, he didn't start learning English until he went to school, and continued to speak German at home, with friends and in the

shops and restaurants he would frequent with his parents. And yet, later in life, he claimed he couldn't remember any of it.

In some parts of the United States, there might be appeals by politicians to win over the Hispanic-American vote, the Italian-American vote, the Jewish-American vote, the African-American vote or the Irish-American vote. But you will be hard-pressed to hear anyone — not even the speaker of the House, John A. Boehner, who has never tried to make any hay out of his German roots — canvassing for the support of the German-American vote.

Still, while German-American culture might be extinct, German-Americans have continued to make a mark on the country, from Neil Armstrong, the astronaut, to Robert B. Zoellick, a former president of the World Bank. Steinway pianos were first made by a German immigrant named Heinrich Steinweg (who became Henry Steinway). Chrysler was established by Walter P. Chrysler, whose family was of German descent, and Boeing was founded by William E. Boeing, the son of a German immigrant.

Yet as the centennial of World War I passes and the 25th anniversary of German unification nears, there are some tender shoots of a nascent German-American identity. A German-American congressional caucus was created in 2010 and now has 93 members. The popularity of craft beer has led to a resurgence in German-style Biergartens, while sports figures like the soccer coach Jürgen Klinsmann and the N.B.A. all-star Dirk Nowitzki celebrate their German identity.

It may be that an identity lost can never be regained. But why not try? It would be good for everyone, reminding millions of Americans that they too are the products of an immigrant culture, which not long ago was forced into silence by fear and intolerance.

Erik Kirschbaum is the author of "Burning Beethoven: The Eradication of German Culture in the United States During World War I."

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